

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in this special FESTAC programme we talk about banners and a one man show from Soweto.

SIGNATURE TUNE:

WALTER BATOWEI:

As a Nigerian I feel very very proud that FESTAC is taking place in my own country. Quite recently here in Britain I was talking to somebody in the tune and they asked me "are you from USA?" "No, I'm a Nigerian" and he said "from Ghana". I said "don't you know where FESTAC is taking place, that's in Nigeria" and he said "Oh Lagos, Nigeria" and I said "yes". So you see, in a way that is publicity and it makes it possible for those who may be ignorant of where Nigeria is to get to know where Nigeria really is.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Nigerian radio producer, Walter Batowei, talking about what FESTAC means to Nigerians and indeed the whole of Africa.

QUOTE:

"The body is a sack and in it lives a strange creature called life"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

That was said by James Mthoba, one person who very much wants to get to FESTAC. James Mthoba, a South African writer and actor has devised a one man show called "Uhlanga" which means 'The Reed' in Zulu, for FESTAC. The show lasts two hours and after a performance in London I asked James Mthoba why he and his director Mshengu, a South African scot had decided on a one man show.

JAMES MTHOBA:

For economic reasons. Otherwise we could have had some other people. We couldn't get money from anywhere so we decided to have a one-man play. We tried various ideas and they didn't work so we decided to look at ourselves. I looked at myself and saw skin and bones and that's where the bones started and we thought of our ancestors and that was the beginning of "The Reed". It was "The Reed", the symbol of life and so I started trying to improvise scenes based on that theme.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

There was a tremendous amount of effort there from the beginning to the end. I wonder how you could undergo the strain of, not only portraying or drawing pictures of scenes, but actually playing so many parts at the same time, and trying to keep the interest of the audience going. In South Africa, what sort of audiences did you play to ?

JAMES MTHOBA:

Three types of audiences, an all black audience in Soweto and then in town I once played to an all white audience but most of the times in places like university campuses, mixed audiences.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now have you noticed the different types of reactions with these audiences ?

JAMES MTHOBA:

Yes, I have. The blacks most like the middle act which is to do mostly with black culture, they like the dances and things like that and the very last part and the bit about Livingstone and western culture, they don't care for and that's where I get a feed back from the white audiences.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And I also notice that when you are talking about the cultural background of the blacks in your country, some of the whites told me they lost touch with what was going on. I mean, you see they didn't show as much interest as when you did a bit about Livingstone and the others.

JAMES MTHOBA:

That's why I always say that this play wasn't meant for London audiences. I think back home is the best place for this thing because they don't understand our culture. When I talk of cattle to mean something more important than just cattle.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now do you think this protest, this theme of protest against the wrongs done by the white man to the black man, don't you think this theme has been a little overworked ? Don't you think that probably a better way of getting across the message is to say "well, all these things have happened to the black man and we've

said this again and again and we are not saying that now but we are only protesting that the world has not yet taken notice of our past protests"; instead of saying well, this is what the white man has done to us, this is what the white man is doing.

JAMES MTHOBA:

Yes, in fact you are right there. At the very end, when I play myself James Mthoba, there is a statement where I say personally that I hate to hate. But now I'm always pushed to play that role of anger, of hatred which is not the role I'd love to play and when I make that prayer I encompass everybody, green, blue, yellow, black that we should try and work together and this madoda (phonetically spelt) to me is the future Africa. Some people say to me, it's only wishful thinking.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now where do you intend to play after you have left here ?

JAMES MTHOBA:

After here I'll go back home until perhaps I hear something from Nigeria, the Arts Festival where I'd really love to go, because my play was meant for them. If I get the confirmation from them .....

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

..... oh you have .....

JAMES MTHOBA:

I've haven't been able to see them since I've been here but I've tried to get in touch with them. I'd love to go to Lagos.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I'm sure you would be very welcome there.

JAMES MTHOBA:

After the Lagos festival I'd rather close up the show.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well you've done such a tremendous amount of work that you certainly need a long rest. But I hope that won't be the end of everything. I hope you will be doing something else in the future.

JAMES MTHOBA:

Yes, but I haven't got plans yet. In fact I'm soaked in drama, I think I'll resign from drama.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, thank you very much James.

JAMES MTHOBA:

I thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

James Mthoba talking about his one man show "Uhlanga". And James would very much like to hear from anyone at FESTAC who'd be interested in getting him to perform there.

MUSIC: Charlie Hayden

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

One of the most colourful aspects at FESTAC are the flags and banners on display. A talented young American John Dugger from California is a professional banner maker who has travelled widely in Africa practising his unique skills. John has designed a special banner for FESTAC and I asked him who it was for.

JOHN DUGGER:

I'm making this in connection with an African drumming group which is organised by Eric Kargou and it will be the backdrop for their performance. This banner is not a political banner, it is a banner of happiness. It's a banner of drumming. It indeed has the portraits of the drummers on it. I'm very much inspired by introducing figuration and indeed portraiture in this particular work to bring out all of the qualities that I've seen in these drummers when they are experiencing their own creation. This one also has aprrots on it, I'm bringing in the African ring-necked parrot and the West African grey aprrot. The work is not on a solid base, colour wise it is divided into three colour sections, red, yellow and green and the figures are across this field and the entire effect of this banner is to increase the rhythmic and emotive power of the drums and to reflect it on an artistic level and to give the drummers the backdrop for the performance. I'm hoping that it will be hung in a structure being made by Graham Stevens, an English pneumatic architect which should be a dome and the banner will be hung inside the dome and the performance will take place there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, I must say right at the beginning that since I was a little boy, I've always loved banners and yet never sat down to think how and where they have been made. It seems to be rather a peculiar subject. Why did you take this interest in making banners ?

JOHN DUGGER:

My interest in banners comes from many different places. I believe the banners should be a public thing so for instance, the Zimbabwe African National Union, when they had seen several of my banners, asked if I would make one for them. And after a few

meetings with one of the brothers from Zanu, getting more information, getting the idea of the type of work they wanted, I produced one with a bit of participation from some of their members. So that I could pass on the skills I had developed over the past two years in order for them to make their own. So it was just not a monopoly of myself over this particular style that I'd been working on but that it was passed more and more on to the popular sphere and become a practice of many many people.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now how do you select the design of the banner? Is it selected for you from who ever you are making it for or do you choose your own?

JOHN DUGGER:

Well, we work in both ways. I invite criticism in all stages of my work and I'm very interested in the subject matter that someone would like. There is the performance function, for interest you can have a banner for a musical group like the one I'm doing for Lagos, you could have a political banner like the ones I've done for the Angolan MPLA for the Zimbabwe African National Union, it can have a sportive function like one of the banners I've been making for the martial arts or it can simply have an artistic function which means that people just see it and it talks about the sociality that we experience every day.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What sort of materials do you make the banners from?

JOHN DUGGER:

I make the banners from only heavy duty industrial-dyed canvas ducking, it's called that and I use the applique technique in other words, we make drawings of figures, drawings of things that are going to go on the banner, we transfer these drawings to canvas, we cut out the canvas, we lay it down, and then we sew it on. So they are made like big cut-outs.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What is the average size of a banner?

JOHN DUGGER:

The average size of a banner of mine is about 45 sq. metres. The largest banner I'll be making in the beginning of 1977 about martial arts will be almost a 100 sq. metres.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And do you use special colours for Africa? I know the Africans, as you know or may well know, love colour?

JOHN DUGGER:

Oh yes, so do I. In fact the type of banner I make is very

much inspired by my contact with African people. I was in Kenya and Senegal in 1969 and I had the beautiful experience of going to the market in Senegal and seeing these Boubou, as they call them, being made by men in the market by a very simple foot operated embroidery work on them. They made them in sections, they are sewn together. It is an inspiring thing to see. And that joined with the experiences I had in India where I also saw large cloth pieces being made in Southern India, gave rise to the inspiration to make these banners. They are very much influenced by my contact with the Third World.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Why is it, I might ask, that Africans cannot make banners for themselves, but have to commission you from outside to do it.

JOHN DUGGER:

That's not really quite true. Africans can do anything they want to do and I really support that. But like I said, I always encourage the participation of other persons in making these works so that it's not just myself. I'm maybe like a seed beginning this but I want it to spread into a much more popular form.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

You've made banners for African groups and individuals, can you describe any theme that you have used on any of these particular banners ?

JOHN DUGGER:

Let me describe the last one I made about the Angolan situation - it was completely made on a black base. It has red area which goes across the top, in yellow are words in Portuguese which say "Victory is Certain". This is a long time slogan of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. But the banner is divided into four sections and there are 5 figures in red. The first section shows a village, the 2nd section shows a plantation, the 3rd section shows a mining apparatus and the 4th section shows a large typewriter. So this banner represents the different stages of economic development in Africa, as it were, from the domestic economy, plantation economy, heavy industrial economy, commodity production. So each one is a didactic experience. I mean, I do a certain amount of research into the subject that I go to and then I try and translate that into artistic form so that when people see the banner, they understand something about the internal aspects of what is going on there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Are the Africans who've assisted you in making these banners, have you found any of them willing to establish banner making in anywhere in Africa ?

JOHN DUGGER:

Yes, I've been invited to go to Ghana by a friend of mine who is organising the production of a drum factory and he's very interested in me bringing down some machinery and teaching my skills.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I'm very very please to hear that you are going to establish this in Ghana, because I come from Ghana.

JOHN DUGGER:

Yes, I knew from your name !

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, thank you very much John Dugger.

JOHN DUGGER:

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, John certainly has inspired all of us on the programme to try our hands at banner-making and we'd be interested to hear from any of you at FESTAC what you think of the banners there.

MUSIC: Charlie Hayden.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And that brings us to the end of this weeks programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and hoping you'll join me again next week, for more Arts and Africa.

MUSIC: Charlie Hayden.

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